

After over a year of speculation about government reshuffle and leadership succession, Timorese resistance hero Xanana Gusmão (popularly known by his nom de guerre, Xanana) finally resigned his prime minister post in February 2015, succeeded by opposition FRETILIN member, Dr Rui Maria de Araújo. While Timor-Leste was consumed by the questions of reshuffle and leadership transition, the country's giant neighbour and former occupier, Indonesia, has been preoccupied with 'post-transitional' issues in the first few months of Indonesia's new government under President Joko Widodo 'Jokowi'.

While Indonesia and Timor-Leste are two distinct countries, the interesting recent experience in Indonesia does offer some valuable lessons for Timor-Leste, particularly as the country embarks on the very important course of leadership transition. This important point of reference, however, largely escapes scholarship attention on Timor-Leste (Nygaard-Christensen 2013; Peake et al. 2014). Jokowi's recent political manoeuvres and challenges offer valuable lessons on navigation of delicate politics of political supporters and opposition; winning and losing political support; and that personal popularity, integrity and professionalism on their own are an inadequate political seal. Some resemblances in political realities of the two countries mean that Rui Araújo can benefit from Jokowi's experience.

The 'Jokowi Phenomenon'

President Jokowi is known for his popular '*blusukan*' visits.¹ This leadership style and his personal characteristics helped his election as governor of Indonesia's capital. He was a candidate at both the elections for mayor of Solo and governor of Jakarta under the flag of *PDI Perjuangan* (PDI-P),² led by influential Megawati Soekarnoputri, the daughter of Indonesia's founding father, President Soekarno. The same party fielded him as presidential candidate at the 2014 elections, partly thanks to his popularity among Indonesian voters.

The beginning of Jokowi's presidency, however, has been marked by serious political challenges. His indecisiveness on nomination of a new police chief

and deterioration in relations between police and the anti-graft commission, for instance, exacerbated criticism of his susceptibility to party politics. Observers dubbed this reputational challenge as Jokowi's 'real political test', while his critics refresh the pre-election labels of *presiden boneka*³ and *petugas partai*.⁴

Timor-Leste's Leadership Transition

When the resignation of Xanana was first made public, a number of names were floated as his possible successor. These included Agio Pereira, a senior member of Gusmão's CNRT party; Dionisio Babo Soares, the secretary-general of CNRT; and Fernando de Araújo 'Lasama', head of the second-biggest ruling coalition partner, the Democratic Party. The fourth name was Rui Araújo, a former minister for health and Central Committee member of the opposition party FRETILIN. All four belong to the so-called Timorese 'new generation'; post-1975 leaders, thus any one of them taking over marked leadership transition to the new generation.

In his letter of resignation, Xanana explained that his decision was intended to pave the way for leadership transition. He announced that his choice 'falls upon Rui Araújo'⁵ as his successor, arguing he 'could not find within the coalition government one person with the theoretical, technical and professional preparation who could guarantee, as head of government, "the Government's stability" that is necessary for this transition.'⁶ Two political reasons make Rui Araújo's nomination interesting: he does not belong to the ruling coalition and, though a senior member, he is not a holder of high office in FRETILIN.

Post-2012 'Political Love Affairs'

The nomination of Rui Araújo to succeed Xanana has not surprised many in Timor-Leste, not least because of the familiarity with his professionalism, integrity and incorruptible characteristics. What is surprising, though, is Xanana's 'honesty' in saying he could not find anyone within his coalition to succeed him. Since it is now known that Xanana had contemplated his resignation as early as 2011, his appraisal of the possible successor within the new generation would have started quite soon after, or even earlier.

In the wake of the 2012 general elections, the two biggest political forces of the country have come to forge a partnership that was inconceivable even just before the elections. Given the history, the so-called 'FRETILIN–CNRT love affairs' or 'Xanana–Alkatiri political romance' would have been made possible only by critical interests the two have in common. Leadership transition is one such important interest.

Not surprisingly, Xanana's political moves, including on his successor, have alienated some within his ruling coalition, even instigating resistance. It appears some members found it difficult to accept that Xanana overlooked them as successor and, worse still, that he chose someone from the opposition party. Constitutionally, however, the prime minister's resignation marks the dissolution of the entire government. Consequently, their voice on Xanana's successor is irrelevant, unless of course if asked by Xanana and CNRT.

Stepping into Shoes of the '75 Generation

Stepping into Xanana's shoes is not an easy undertaking. In this sense Rui Araújo's acceptance of the nomination is a daring decision that deserves admiration. Given the political stature of Xanana, it would be fair to expect that Rui Araújo might struggle to cope with high public expectations. In light of the time frame before the next general elections, the prime ministership will prove to be an enormously difficult task. He is also likely to encounter resistance from some who vied his appointment in the new cabinet. Not least important is all governance problems the government inherits. It is unavoidable that, given the nature of his nomination, Rui Araújo could be labelled a '*petugas* Xanana'⁷ as he negotiates his way through the politics of the new government.⁸

There is no doubt about Rui Araújo's competency for the post he now occupies. One thing he is yet to be fully tested in, however, is politics. His self-acknowledged lack of political experience makes the recent lessons from Indonesia all the more valuable as he is likely to be prone to political influence. When he accepted to serve as health minister in the first post-independence government led by FRETILIN, Rui Araújo was not a formal member of the ruling party. Yet he managed to fend off political intervention from then–prime minister Mari Alkatiri — the influential secretary-general of FRETILIN. The challenge he will

now face as prime minister is obviously of a different magnitude, but it is not impossible that he can manage this again.

The two biggest political forces of Timor-Leste and all the living founding fathers of the country share an interest in having a well-managed leadership transition. If Rui Araújo fails to modify the shoes that Timor-Leste's '75 generation left to fit for the succeeding generations, it will go down in history as the failure of Xanana and FRETILIN too. After all, Rui Araújo's prime ministership is a crucial test to the management of Timor-Leste's leadership transition. But as Jokowi's experience in Indonesia shows, management of political influence is equally important to that of personal competency and integrity for Rui Araújo to succeed.

Author Notes

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Endnotes

- 1 Visiting places where nobody wants to go to meet and talk to people.
- 2 Indonesian Democratic Party — Struggle.
- 3 Puppet president.
- 4 Derived from a Megawati statement at the announcement of Jokowi's candidacy and interpreted as a 'courier of PDI-P who should implement the party's mandates'.
- 5 Xanana's letter of resignation to President Taur Matan Ruak, 5 February 2015.
- 6 Xanana's letter to leaders of ruling coalition parties informing his resignation, 5 February 2015.
- 7 A 'courier' of Xanana, obliged to implement mandates given by Xanana, echoing Jokowi's label in Indonesia.
- 8 Rui Araújo was chosen by Xanana to succeed him, a subject of discussion as the constitution of Timor-Leste does not recognise the notion of succession.

References

- Nygaard-Christensen, M. 2013. Negotiating Indonesia: Political Genealogies of Timorese Democracy. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 14(5):423–37.
- Peake, G., L. Kent, A. Damaledo and P. Myat Thu 2014. *Influences and Echoes of Indonesia in Timor-Leste*. In *Brief* 2014/60. Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, The Australian National University.

